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Womanism and the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri

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WOMANISM AND THE FICTION OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

A Thesis Presented

by

Genna Welsh Kasun

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

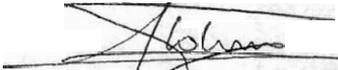
The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
Specializing in English

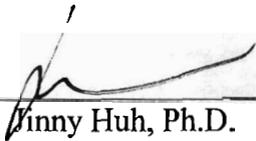
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Accepted by the Faculty of the Graduate College, The University of Vermont, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, specializing in English.

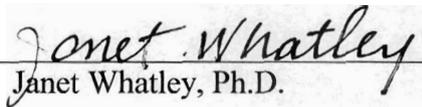
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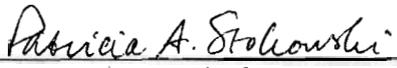
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Abstract

Calling on both theoretical and critical womanist texts and the recent fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri -- her two recent works explored are her novel *The Namesake* and short story and novella collection *Unaccustomed Earth* -- this thesis seeks to show how Lahiri both exemplifies and proposes a redefinition of womanism in her work.

Lahiri best exemplifies the family-centeredness of Africana womanism, the most thoroughly articulated theory of womanism to date, in her narratives of Bengali-American families, whose members well describe both physical and cultural maternity, a great tenet of womanism as defined by womanism scholars Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Clenora Hudson-Weems. However, in questioning both Hudson-Weems and Layli Phillips' notions of womanism that can be customizable for any culture, I propose a revision and thorough articulation of "Indian" or "Bengali" womanism as explored by Lahiri, adding characteristics such as intergenerational exchange.

These articulations lead to greater questions (too large to explore in this thesis) of womanism and of "Indian womanism" which have yet to be explored, but which Lahiri introduces and complicates.

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Introduction

Many critics cite Alice Walker's first poetic, metaphoric coining of the term *womanism* in her 1983 work *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* as the start of womanism. But womanism as a literary theory was first theoretically articulated—despite critics' later attempts to return to Walker's womanism—in an African context in Clenora Hudson-Weems's 1993 book *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*:

Reclaiming Ourselves:

The Africana womanist is not to be confused with Alice Walker's "womanist" as presented in her collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens...* Neither an outgrowth nor an addendum to feminism, *Africana Womanism* is not Black feminism, African feminism, or Walker's womanism that some Africana women have come to embrace. *Africana Womanism* is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women. (23-24)

Hudson-Weems's self-defining and self-naming, often Afrocentric, brand of womanism includes a large list of characteristics:

Critical to understanding and appreciating the Africana woman is recognizing her common 18 features: (1) *a self-namer* and (2) *a self-definer*; (3) *family-centered*, (4) *genuine in sisterhood*, (5) *strong*, (6) *in concert with male in struggle*, (7) *whole*, (8) *authentic*, (9) *a flexible role player*, (10) *respected*, (11) *recognized*, (12) *spiritual*, (13) *male compatible*, (14) *respectful of elders*, (15) *adaptable*, (16) *ambitious*, (17) *mothering* and (18) *nurturing*. (143)

This womanism essentially defines itself as African women, together with men, working to develop their own theory to assess the oppression of colonialism and neocolonization, from Western forces such as feminist hegemony, which Hudson-Weems finds inherently racist and neopatriarchal.

Central to Hudson-Weems's womanism is the initiative that Africana women name and define themselves, and resist any form of feminism even 'black feminism.' Hudson-Weems rebukes Walker and her womanism for allying herself/itself with feminism: "The name itself, African feminism, is problematic, as it naturally suggests an alignment with feminism, a concept that has been alien to the plight of Africana women from its inception" (19). It should be noted here that Hudson-Weems, who repeatedly marks feminism as inherently racist in her texts, is chiefly concerned with feminism's inability to prioritize race, which she marks as more important to African women, and African people, than gendered problems (though womanism, as a theory seeks to rectify prejudices that are racial *and* gendered, but only in that order). Hudson-Weems writes:

While White feminists today are not necessarily hostile to the most dominant issues that impact more upon the lives of Africana women, the majority are not sensitive to the magnitude of these concerns. For example, the feminist movement is not free from racism, since many feminists are guilty of it. (49)

Hudson-Weems's words imply a difference in priority from the feminist movement that is two-pronged. Historically, feminism includes a racism Hudson-Weems presents through a re-presentation of Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I A Woman" speech. According to Hudson-Weems, Truth was "attacking that element of the Women's Rights agenda that excluded her" (36) and that exclusion was based solely on race. Hudson-Weems cites the following feminists in her refutation of feminism: Susan B. Anthony, Carrie Chapman Catt, Catherine Clinton, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem and even the black feminist bell hooks. Though the theoretical nature or contemporaneousness of many of these feminists could be debated, Hudson-Weems

argues that the difference between feminism and womanism cannot be collapsed because of a difference in priorities:

The primary concerns of these women [Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman and Ida B. Wells] were not of a feminist nature, but rather a commitment to the centrality of the African-American freedom struggle. Their primary concern was the life-threatening plight of all Africana people, both men and women, at the hands of a racist system. (36)

Yet Hudson-Weems seems unmoved by and uninterested in more contemporary feminists' concerns to hear Africana and other diverse voices and opinions in feminism, such as the desire to diversify that Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl voice in their Introduction to the *Feminisms* anthology entitled "About Feminisms":

Perhaps the most important development in the five years that have passed since we edited the first *Feminisms* is a widening acknowledgement that feminist studies have been too much the domain of white, middle-class, straight women who share much of the cultural privilege of their male counterparts. (xi)

In short, Hudson-Weems concludes that Africana womanism must be self-defined and self-named by Africana women, and that conclusion implies a womanist struggle for independent theory and hegemony that resists ethnic and gendered prejudice, a struggle that must be undertaken with the help of men.

The Africana womanist is also *in concert with males* in the broader struggle for humanity and the liberation of all Africana people.... Unlike the mainstream feminist, whose struggle is characteristically independent of and oftentimes adverse to male participation, the Africana womanist invites her male counterpart into her struggle for liberation and parity in society, as this struggle has been traditionally the glue that has held them together and enabled them to survive in a particularly hostile and racist society. (61)

Hudson-Weems's theoretical articulations of what Walker suggests in poetic metaphor are groundbreaking, but not without fault. Abrasive toward a feminism that often hoped to welcome African women, her theory is highly concerned with Afrocentric recreation

of culture, despite her second edition's invitation for diverse cultural implementations of her Africana womanism. (In 2004, Hudson-Weems reiterates her womanist theoretical articulations by supporting her theory with new critical explorations in an anthology entitled *Africana Womanist Literary Theory*.)

In 1996, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi further articulates womanism in *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*. In exploring Nigerian novels by women, Ogunyemi proposes an African womanism that upholds the "everydayness" of Hudson-Weems's theory by arguing for "commonplace," "vernacular" womanist theory and implication (3-4). In addition to refuting feminism as Hudson-Weems did, Ogunyemi, too, supported a need for male-female cooperation in womanism, further articulating this concept as natural to the African culture(s):

As writers with a cause, women are playing the transformational role of the griotte as entertainer, teacher, social critic, ideologue, and wise but despised mother. Christopher Miller (1990, 178) captures the versatility of the griot's art in contemporary culture by hypothetically replacing the oral medium with the written. Since griots traditionally are male or female, my use of the feminine form, *griotte*, is to figure in the female dimension, which is usually suppressed. As griottes, the women writers cause imperceptible shifts in established discourses. Griots serve as vital links between men and women, 'participat[ing] as women while remaining men,' as Sory Camara so adroitly put it (see Miller 1990, 263). A slight reversal is pertinent here: the women writers, as privileged and responsible Nigerian daughters, participate in the discourse, like men, while remaining true to their womanhood. This gender crossing underscores the productiveness of complementarity. (3-4)

Ogunyemi built on Hudson-Weems' ideas, without citing them directly, by supporting the womanist idea that black men share in the responsibility of colonialism and neocolonization and corresponding postcolonial work, "Continued collaboration between inept and corrupt black leaders and white men has partly exacerbated the

problems of colonialism and postcolonialism, restricting African females to a woman's space" (6).

Additionally, Ogunyemi began further articulating the theme of maternity, which Hudson-Weems introduces only in passing, by founding an exploration of women's traditional roles—the negatives and the positives of traditionality:

To establish a theory under the rubric of vernacularism, in which womanist theory is obviously implicated, I will explore women's space to (dis)cover women in an attempt to explain their place in the household and in the public; hypothesize the nature of women's vernacular discourse and then analyze the texts generated from this burgeoning but indeterminate background, thereby returning women from obligatory exile to legitimate position in our parents' house. (8)

These explorations of mothers and maternity would grow into what is perhaps Ogunyemi's most important contribution to womanism – the idea that women are mothers physically and culturally and that even non-biological mothers, even men, can maternalize and nurture culture in others. In the conclusion to her book, Ogunyemi wrote: "Nigeria, Athena-like, popped out of Lord Lugard's head without the would-be Nigerians participating in the birthing process" (332). She concludes her work by asking men and women to take place in a birthing process, as womanists, to be maternal in creating postcolonial Nigerian identity:

If we play our politics shrewdly, as men and women, we can live to honor our mothers and encourage fathers, who conveniently absent themselves for a while when there is trouble, to accept responsibility. This is homecoming time; we must put the house we inherited in order. (332)

Ogunyemi's work, such as the quote above, introduces a self-community, local-global cooperation that is passed down to future womanist theorists.

Although she did not articulate a desire, as Hudson-Weems did, for inter-cultural womanisms, future womanists uphold and further articulate Ogunyemi's work. Layli Phillips explores global womanisms not unlike Ogunyemi's in her 2006 anthology *The Womanist Reader*.

Phillips, who sets as her own project the condensation and elaboration of womanism, defines womanism as "a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people." In her work, Phillips upholds Sherley Anne Williams's 2000 statement of the controversiality of womanism's heterosexuality, even its homophobia, even as she (Phillips) supports family-centered, male-female cooperative notions central to womanist theory as explored by Hudson-Weems and Ogunyemi. Yet, Phillips' rearticulation of womanism lies in her attempt to incorporate all cultures (and many disciplines) into womanist theory:

Neither has womanism been limited to Black American contexts. Explorations of the womanist idea can be found in African, Australian (Aboriginal), Canadian, Caribbean/West Indian, Chinese/Taiwanese, European, Latino/Latina American, Native American Indian and Southeast Asian/Indian cultural contexts, scholarly and otherwise. (xxi)

But in trying to open up womanism, cross culturally and other wise, Phillips creates problems not unlike the Afrocentricity of her womanist predecessors:

This state of affairs has preserved the open-ended, polyvalent, polyvocal, dialogic, noncentralized, and improvisational character of womanism, allowing it to resist canonization, academic appropriation and ideological subsumption... Womanism is an ethnically and culturally situated (although not bounded) perspective that does not seek to negate difference through transcending it. Rather... womanism

seeks to harmonize and coordinate difference so that difference does not become irreconcilable and dissolve into violent destruction. (xxi-xxii)

While Phillips' openness may seem harmless, even inviting, one must consider its ramifications to her definition of womanism. Indeed, in attempting to "harmonize" others voices, Phillips makes the didactic nature of defining womanism, or any theory, unrealistic and contradictory to her definition of its own plurality.

War, violence, poverty, environmental degradation, racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, heterosexism, xenophobia, able-ism, ageism, inadequate health care, inadequate education, and the like all begin in the realm of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Womanists value everyday activism that involves confronting violence and *oppression wherever and whenever* they appear across the course of a day. (xxx, my emphasis)

Phillips' pluralistic aims seem unending: "To reiterate, '*womanist*' is a term of avowal; once you claim it, it's yours, and you decide what it means and how to enact it" (xli), she concludes. Yet these statements raise many important questions for womanism. How can any theory be nonideological or nonbiased? How can one theory fight all oppression without sacrificing its ideas to too much plurality?

Earlier theoretical explorations of womanism in the form of African/a womanisms, such as those of Hudson-Weems and Ogunyemi, explored primarily black or African/a manifestations of womanism. It is not until Phillips that critics and readers are encouraged to support womanist theoretical explorations in other cultures, as articulated in such words (Walker and others seem more than happy to listen to non-black, non-African womanist articulations; however, that is not their project individually, so they stuck to articulating only the international or global goal of womanism in mostly African terms.) It is not a surprise then that the critical examinations of Indian texts through a

womanist lens and the re-articulation of womanist theory in differing cultural terms, is not popular today, as of yet.

While exploration of African and Africana womanism is well under way, as can be seen from an observation of Ogunyemi's, Hudson-Weems', and others womanist texts' titles alone, Indian-/Bengali-American womanism is yet to be heard of, let alone articulated, and this is unfortunate. Though she never explicitly addresses womanism by name in her fiction, the womanistic manifestations of Jhumpa Lahiri in her various works of fiction provide an insightful point of exploration. In viewing Lahiri through an African/a womanist lens, one can see that Lahiri goes far in manifesting womanism and presenting, if only unintentionally or unadmittedly, challenges to and critiques of womanism, in African/a, global and/or Indian-/Bengali-American form. Lahiri's fiction focuses on the struggle of both Indian-American women, first and foremost, and the role of Indian-American men in individually and collectively creating and nurturing American and Bengali and Bengali-American identities in their new American landscape. Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* is a stunning example of womanist maternity, incorporating maternity that is both physical and cultural on the part of two protagonists, a mother, Ashima, and her son, Gogol, who, fittingly, searches for his own name and identity in Lahiri's new womanist novel. Lahiri's newer short story and novella collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, repeats a maternal womanism, but to a quite different, even, at times, opposite effect, and again the physical and cultural maternity becomes a duty shared by female and male protagonists. Lahiri's technique of both raising awareness of the power of womanist maternity in the lives and actions of Indian- /Bengali-American

women is greatly aided by the representation of positive Indian and Indian-American men, often narrators of much of the story themselves, and this collaborative womanism greatly exemplifies even as it re-articulates a brand of womanism that is unique in Lahiri, Indian-American literary culture and womanism alike.

The first chapter of this thesis project seeks to explore Lahiri's manifestations of womanism and the second relays challenges to womanism that Lahiri's fiction brings forth (though she only unconsciously, fictionally addresses these topics). Additionally, some of Lahiri's fictional articulations might make valuable contribution to an Indian-/Bengali-American womanism, yet to be explored in some larger theoretical project.

Chapter 1: Lahiri Enlists Womanism

In citing womanism's differences from feminism or black feminism, Hudson-Weems first turns to the example of family. In contrast to many "white feminists who want independence and freedom from family responsibility...African women have wanted to be 'liberated' to the community, family and its responsibilities" (Hudson-Weems 34). Womanists, she argues, have "stopped short of eliminating African men as allied in the struggle for liberation and family-hood" (34).

The family metaphor Hudson-Weems employs, which Ogunyemi and Phillips support in their criticism and theory, manifests itself in two distinct ways: maternity and male-female cooperation. Maternity can represent both physical mothering and the resulting caretaker roles maternity often engenders and the cultural maternity that embodies individual, familial and communal identity formulation and nurturing.

Multi-gendered cooperation, typified in womanism by male-female relationships, can include marriage, but often includes many relationships implied but as yet unarticulated, despite its constant reaffirmation as a tenet, in womanist theoretical work.

Nowhere, it seems, could the mix of individual, familial, and communal maternity, intricately woven with inter-gendered, intercultural work be better exemplified than in the novel *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. In this novel, Ashima, a young Bengali-American immigrant gives birth to, both physically and culturally, her son Gogol, whose search for identity is entirely grounded on positive family role models, who nurture his intercultural identity growth. And, yet, a study of Lahiri's womanist maternity seems incomplete without an investigation of the novella, "Hema and

Kaushik,” from her newest collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*. Here, Lahiri envisions for readers what a loss of womanist cultural maternity might look like.

Maternity in *The Namesake*

“The Africana womanist insisted on identifying herself as mother and companion” (56), Hudson-Weems writes in her first womanist theoretical work. “The Africana womanist is *family-centered*, as she is more concerned with her entire family rather than with just herself and her sisters” (Hudson-Weems 58). Unlike white feminists who, Hudson-Weems writes, “seek to replicate the individualism of White patriarchal capitalism” (58), Africana womanists seek out maternity.

In her *Womanist Reader*, Layli Phillips further articulates womanist motherhood, working from Ogunyemi’s work, stating it must be:

dissociated from its purely biological connotation to include...notions of spiritual mother (Osun), mother as oracle (Odu), childless mother (Mammywata) and community mother (Omunwa/Iyalode). Essentially, motherhood is a set of behaviors based on caretaking, management, nurturance, education, spiritual meditation, and dispute resolution. Anyone—whether female or male, old or young, with or without children, heterosexual or same-gender-loving—can engage in these behaviors and, therefore, mother. In doing so, every individual has the ability to contribute to the ultimate goals of womanism: societal healing, reconciliation of the relationship between people and nature, and the achievement and maintenance of commonweal. (xxix)

Ashima’s physical maternity begins early in *The Namesake*. At the very commencement of the novel, Ashima is pregnant, arriving in Cambridge, Massachusetts from Calcutta, India. She almost immediately gives birth to and rears Gogol, but the rearing Ashima takes on is greater than traditional childbearing, and, as Gogol soon learns during his own coming-of-age story, is generously bestowed on many Americans who have no blood ties to himself or Ashima. Indeed, Ashima purposefully becomes a

mother of culture for herself, her son and many young Bengali-Americans, both early on in the novel and in its later pages, where she fosters new cultural transmissions with her Caucasian American friends.

In the beginning, Lahiri's unnamed, third person-omniscient narrator writes of Ashima's maternity:

As the baby grows, so, too, does their circle of Bengali acquaintances... They all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends. Most of them live within walking distance of one another in Cambridge. The husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers. The wives, homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carp that's sold in Chinatown, that it's possible to make halwa from Cream of Wheat. (Lahiri, *Namesake* 38; ch. 2)

In this quote, Lahiri interweaves Ashima's physical maternity of Gogol with the communal maternity, here Bengali-American identity nurturing and translation, she shares with her Bengali-American friends. In helping others, Ashima's ability to mother herself culturally is laid forth, and she exemplifies both autonomous and communal growth, which are both necessary to womanist ideas of maternity.

Ashima's maternity, individual, familial and communal, only grows throughout the novel as Gogol and his intercultural identity develop, and, as the novel and Gogol's narrative concludes, Ashima begins a new chapter of her life, in which she plans to travel, splitting her remaining years between Calcutta and the American homes of Gogol and her daughter, Sonia. One can only envision Ashima further maternalizing herself and others in this next stage of her life, as she had in the previously narrated portions which readers are permitted to glimpse. As she sells her house, no longer necessary in her retirement, she hosts a final Bengali-American party to mark the end of her days in the home she

shared with her son, daughter, and now deceased husband on Pemberton Road. At this party, Ashima's maternity of the community is remembered and honored by guests who will miss Ashima's parties and the cultural learning they encouraged:

Gogol does not know to whom these children belong – half the guests are people his mother has befriended in recent years, people who were at his wedding but whom he does not recognize. People talk of how much they've come to love Ashima's Christmas Eve parties, that they've missed them these past few years, that it won't be the same without her. They have come to rely on her, Gogol realizes, to collect them together, to organize the holiday, to convert it, to introduce the tradition to those who are new. It has always felt adopted to him, an accident of circumstance, a celebration not really meant to be. And yet it was for him, for Sonia, that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning these customs. It was for their sake that it had come to all this. (Lahiri, *Namesake* 286; ch. 12)

Yet again, Ashima's communal maternity is laid forth in her communal sharing of cultural translation; here she translates the Christian Christmas holiday into a Bengali gathering where Bengali-Americans learn about the American holiday and simultaneously express their own cultural rituals. And, once more, Ashima's communal maternity is tied to her physical maternity of Gogol and his sister, Sonia, who are the reason for Ashima's own learning about the Christian/American version of the holiday. Readers are also here reminded of Hudson-Weems' words that African women, unlike feminists, longed to be "'liberated' to the community" (34). The example of Ashima's going away/Christmas party well displays her own liberation. No longer the isolated, frightened Bengali who arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, unsure of how to retain her cultural heritage, she is now, thanks to her self-initiated familial and communal development, liberated from powerless to powerful and even empowering.

Indeed throughout the novel, it is obvious that the tie to Ashima's cultural maternity is the physical maternity of raising her son and daughter itself. In the

quotation, Ashima's learning about Christmas for Sonia and Gogol is central, yet it enables her to later provide communal maternity at gatherings like her farewell-Christmas party. And yet, this womanistic rendering of maternity, it seems, is not only extended to women in the novel.

Ashoke, Ashima's husband and Gogol's father, is also the bearer of cultural maternity in *The Namesake*. Though quieter and far more introverted and autonomous than his wife, taking far less space in Lahiri's narrative, this lifelong reader of books bestows a unique cultural identity on his son – his namesake – which forms the entire thread around which Gogol's narrative of identity and self-discovery is told.

Hudson-Weems writes, "The Africana woman has never been restricted to the home and household chores, and her male counterpart had more often than not shared the role as homemaker" (64). This is certainly true of Lahiri's men, like Ashoke, who wash dishes, help prepare meals, plant gardens and generally refute Eurocentric notions of males dictating and controlling households. Indeed, in *The Namesake* Ashoke, Ashima, Gogol, and Sonia take on household control nontraditional to Westerners, but at home to their Bengali-American culture. And, in addition to doing household chores, Ashoke takes a uniquely maternal role in the development of his son, one that is certainly trans-biological.

Like Ashima, Ashoke's own narrative gives birth to Gogol both physically and culturally. After a life-threatening train accident, which leaves Ashoke incapable of movement for nearly a year in his parents' Calcutta home, Ashoke decides to father, like Ashima (though far more intentionally), an exploratory, transnational identity for himself

and later his children by moving to America to pursue his life and career. After lying in bed thinking only of his immobility, Ashoke, upon healing, “began to envision another sort of future. He imagined not only walking, but walking away, as far as he could from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 20; ch. 1). In this move, and in naming his son after his own favorite author, the pages of whose book saved his life in the train accident, Ashoke bestows a multicultural identity to his son. By moving from Calcutta to Cambridge, and marrying and impregnating Ashima, Ashoke physically creates a Bengali-American space for Gogol. By inscribing Gogol’s name on a birth certificate, combining both his interest for Gogol the author and his love of life resulting from the train accident in which Gogol’s pages saved his life, Ashoke bestows a cross-cultural identity textually. Ashoke’s actions, physical and textual, present Gogol with a multi-cultural heritage, integrating elements of Russian literature, Bengali culture and American geographical space, in a womanistic, maternal move. When Ashoke tells Gogol the origins of his name – that the pages of Gogol, one of his favorite authors, saved him after a train accident – Gogol asks, “Is that what you think of when you think of me?...Do I remind you of that night?” “Not at all,” Ashoke replies, “You remind me of everything that followed” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 124; ch. 5). In naming his son, Ashoke not only nurtures Gogol’s multicultural identity, he nurtures, like Ashima, a new identity that is all his own, and this independence, this womanistic maternity provides Gogol with yet another means by which to explore himself and his origins.

It is perhaps Gogol who best displays the most unique manifestation of womanistic maternity in Lahiri's novel, despite the fact that he is not a woman. Throughout the novel, it is uncanny how well Gogol can envision his mother's feelings and reactions to emotions and events he, Gogol, encounters.

Gogol thinks at his American girlfriend's parents' dinner party: "His own mother would never have served so few dishes to a guest. She would have kept her eyes trained on Maxine, insisting she have seconds and then thirds" (Lahiri, *Namesake* 133; ch. 6). In contemplating his mother's feelings and reactions in his own quest to think, feel and react, Gogol not only recognizes Ashima's Bengali heritage and its mores, but also his own need to incorporate both American and Bengali elements into his identity. He can no more deny that Ashima's entertaining methods are ingrained in his mind and part of him than he can deny that he often finds himself in American homes with Americans entertaining. These exclusively American spaces, such as Lydia Ratliff's kitchen, in which Lydia says things like "You could be Italian" (Lahiri, *Namesake* 134; ch. 6), are different from his own (and his mother's) conceptions, but are geographically and culturally central to his life nonetheless. Upon having realizations like this, in which Gogol sees the need for both cultural identities, he gives birth to a form of cultural maternity of the self that is entirely his own.

This maternity, found by gazing and ruminating on ideas evolving in his own consciousness, often takes place in Gogol's observations of maternity and hospitality – especially in his comparison of Lydia, the mother of Gogol's girlfriend Maxine, to his own mother, as takes place in the quote above. In observing Lydia, Gogol is struck by

her difference from his own mother. Unlike Ashima, Lydia entertains effortlessly, spends money lavishly, and is very comfortable with the acknowledgement of not only her daughter's relationships but also her sex life. In the instances where Gogol glimpses Lydia's difference from Ashima, as he dates Maxine, he constantly observes Lydia's difference, and rightly attributes it as cultural, lending further credibility to the womanist notion that maternity is cultural.

It is as he is dating Maxine that Gogol realizes his fate – in that relationship alone – as a piece of cultural eccentricity. In effect, he becomes an object of comparison through which Lydia and her friends are allowed to better express their Americanness. In these American – Bengali-American dialogues between the Ratliffs and their friends and Gogol, Gogol's Bengali identity is entirely masked. “I once had a girlfriend who went to India,” an American party guest of Lydia's quips. “Oh? Where did she go?” Gogol returns. “I don't know. All I remember is that she came back thin as a rail and I was horribly envious of her,” the American woman replies (Lahiri, *Namesake* 157; ch. 6). It might seem easy to articulate that Gogol, then, is an Oriental conversation accessory for the Ratliffs, but Lydia's own reaction to introducing Gogol reveals something horrifyingly more telling.

‘But, you're Indian,’ Pamela says, frowning. ‘I'd think the climate wouldn't affect you, given your heritage.’

‘Pamela, Nick's American,’ Lydia says, leaning across the table, rescuing Gogol from the conversation. ‘He was born here.’ She turns to him, and he sees from Lydia's expression that after all these months, she herself isn't sure. ‘Weren't you?’ (Lahiri, *Namesake* 157; ch. 6)

With the Ratliffs, as in the example above, Gogol realizes a total alienation from his Bengali roots. Lydia, Maxine and Gerald not only joke about mistaking Gogol's cultural

and ethnic heritage as Italian, they are entirely unknowing about his cultural values and background, so central to his identity, as evidenced in his constant mental assessments of the differences between the Ratliffs' American mores and his family's Bengali-American values and actions. The freedom from Bengali identity, the loss of identity Lydia blatantly and inadvertently expresses in the presence of strangers becomes, to Gogol, insufficient for the purpose of defining and fulfilling himself.

In the end, Gogol realizes, in comparing Lydia, Maxine, and their non-Bengali Americanness to his mother's Bengaliness, that he cannot deny his connection to his mother's culture, her maternity and his proximity to his mother's essentialism. However, it is in realizing that his mother and Lydia are two distinct examples of two very different cultures that Gogol realizes his own need for American – American-Bengali hybridity, of his necessity to incorporate both Bengali and American elements into his character. This realization Gogol experiences also comes as a result of immersing himself into an entirely Bengali-American relationship with his then-wife Moushumi. In concluding Gogol and Moushumi's marriage to be too Bengali-American, Lahiri implies that hybrid identity, here Bengali-American identity, is itself possible of the kind of essentialism that purer types of identity by which Bengali and Caucasian-American identity are sometimes typified. Gogol and Moushumi's relationship, Lahiri implies, is an example of cultural identity construction that is too local and too specific. Not only are the two partners Bengali-Americans, but they are Americans in the northeastern United States who rely too much on typical Bengali identity stereotypes such as over-education, preoccupation

with parental influence and city and suburb living, tropes Lahiri identifies as too regularly followed by Bengali-Americans seeking to carve out their own identity.

At conclusion, it is Gogol's own multicultural identity, placed not only between Bengali and American culture, but between American and Bengali-American culture, which can support not only the physical but the cultural maternity he has received throughout his life's journey thus far, in addition to his own maternity, resulting from his explorations of maternity past and impending. In the final pages of *The Namesake*, Gogol envisions not only his self-generated maternity of his own cultural identity, but his potential for physical p/maternity (and thus further cultural maternity of another) as well, as he examines a copy of Nickolai Gogol's "The Overcoat," presented to him, a sign of cultural maternity like his name, by his father:

Gogol gets up, shuts the door to his room, muffling the noise of the party that swells below him, the laughter of the children playing down the hall. He sits cross-legged on the bed. He opens the book, glances at an illustration of Nikolai Gogol, and then at the chronology of the author's life on the facing page. Born March 20, 1809. The death of his father, 1825. Publishes his first story, 1830. Travels to Rome, 1837. Dies 1852, one month before his forty-third birthday. In another ten years, Gogol Ganguli will be that age. He wonders if he will be married again one day, if he will ever have a child to name. A month from now, he will begin a new job at a smaller architectural practice, producing his own designs. There is a possibility, eventually, of becoming an associate, of the firm incorporating his name. (Lahiri, *Namesake* 289-290; ch. 12)

Gogol's contemplation of his own future, his wondering about his own physical paternity and the unique connection he makes of p/maternity to naming a child are examined in this quote which coincides with Gogol's undertaking a unique self examination instigated by his father's gift to him – a culture-giving name and a literary means by which to explore his own very unique identity. In this passage, as in others, Lahiri weaves together

physical p/maternity with cultural rearing, male and female cooperation, and self and communal examination and growth that greatly exemplify, even without explicit acknowledgment, womanist ideals.

Lahiri's Womanist Maternity in *Unaccustomed Earth*

Like Ogunyemi, who wrote that household roles both subjugated and empowered Nigerian women, Jhumpa Lahiri manifests a curious way of attributing power to the women in her fiction. By placing her female characters in traditional roles – such as nearly silent, often jobless housewives and/or mothers – Lahiri displays, through the inner monologue and narrative of her female characters, their impact on other characters' consciousnesses, and their communal bonding – in short, their great power. These women use their constant re-evaluation of cross-cultural, Indian-American mores, often developed by implementing maternity, to improve their lives and the lives of those around them. In short, despite situating her female characters as outwardly powerless in Western society, Lahiri reveals their inner adaptability yet not over-assimilatory nature. Such was the case with Ashima and Gogol.

Lahiri positions the heroine of the title short story to her newest collection *Unaccustomed Earth* similarly to Ashima. Ruma, a Bengali-American woman and former lawyer, is a stay-at-home-mom, expecting the birth of her second child, at the outset of her narrative. As she raises her son, Akash, a toddler throughout the entirety of the story (unlike Gogol who grows to adulthood in *The Namesake*), she pays host to her newly widowed father, and mothers both Akash, her father and herself both physically and culturally. This maternity originates through, aptly enough, her own ruminations

based on the contemplation of her late mother's Bengali-American views, in addition to her own and her American husband's own experiences in America.

Thinking of her father's gardening in unaccustomed soil, often late into the evening, Ruma is reminded of her Bengali mother's reluctance to eat before first serving her husband, "Her mother would complain, having to keep dinner waiting until nine at night. 'Go ahead and eat,' Ruma would say, but her mother, trained all her life to serve her husband first, would never consider such a thing" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 16).

Thinking, later in the narrative, of her decision to remain jobless and her father's lack of support for this decision, Ruma concludes, "Her mother would have understood her decision, would have been understanding and proud" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 36).

These contemplations of maternal values result in Ruma's eventual decision to accept her father's new post-marital relationship. In a moment that fulfills Lahiri's message of the complexity – both cultural and emotional—of a woman's cross-cultural, vernacular response, Lahiri presents Ruma sending her father's accidentally left behind postcard to his new girlfriend into the mail. The significance of the postcard is that it both presents the possibility for Ruma's admitted acceptance of the new relationship and, at the same time, presents the possibility of failure – the postcard Ruma mails may never arrive.

Given the optimism of both Ruma's story and the narrative of Gogol, it seems that Lahiri's optimism for maternity at an individual and communal level is high. But careful analysis of Ruma's story recalls that her father's maternity was, unlike Ashoke's, quite

limited. And the concluding and longest story in Lahiri's new collection adds to a sharp contradiction of Lahiri's earlier optimism.

Indeed, the most potent narrative of maternity in Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* is the tragic narrative of maternity lost, both physically and culturally, in "Hema and Kaushik." Unlike Gogol, who is often surrounded by a backdrop of lush multicultural and maternal success, Kaushik, the protagonist of Lahiri's novella is surrounded by intercultural and maternal loss and destruction. Gogol's backdrop of multitudinous delicious 'foreign' restaurants and markets in which he daily strolls in the *Namesake*, even the French cuisine over which he and Moushumi fall in love is greatly opposite to the corpses and bloodshed of the post 9-11 world Kaushik daily encounters. A photographer of international disasters, Kaushik routinely captures images of international failure at hybridity, postcolonialism, international diplomacy, and more.

Hema catches a glimpse of the horror that fills Kaushik's lens everyday:

There were countless images, terrible things, things she'd read about in the newspaper and never had to think about again. Buses blasted apart by bombs, bodies on stretchers, young boys throwing stones. (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 315)

Readers, eyeing Lahiri's global fallout, can only conclude that the young boys, rapt in vandalism, are, if even just for the moment, devoid of maternity.

Kaushik has been led down this path of life by the death of his mother, Parul, and the void of her maternity, which he and his father could not fill. After her death and his father's remarriage, Kaushik, funded by his father, takes off for an isolated tour of the East Coast of the United States, exploring deathlike scenes reminding him of his mother and her death. But Kaushik's loss of maternity is not simultaneous with the death of his

mother. It should be noted that she provided little cultural maternity from the beginning. Her love of materialism, articulated by Hema and her family as American, was wholly developed in India, where her cultural maternity and that maternity she could have bestowed to her son could have been nurtured. And Kaushik's father, who might have filled the void of maternity after Parul's death (as Ashoke reinforced cultural maternity to Gogol), chose to exclude Kaushik from his life by remarrying quickly and to a stranger after Parul's death.

Kaushik's own potential for mothering himself and others is laid forth in this section of the narrative as well. Although he quickly gains a special sibling bond with the two daughters, Rupa and Piu, of his father's new wife, Chitra, who have also lost a parent, teaching these girls how to handle American money, taking them to museums, an Aquarium, and Dunkin Donuts, the connection's limits are soon revealed. Just days after declaring, "I felt separate from them in every way but at the same time could not deny the things that bound us together" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 272), Kaushik observes that a need for defined connection, a need for cultural maternity, is constantly resurfacing despite the connection he and his stepsisters share and have built. "We were all waiting for my father, waiting for him to return and explain, if only by his presence, why we were sitting together drinking tea" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 277), Kaushik thinks. But paternity is not necessarily maternity. Not all fathers – or mothers for that matter – uphold womanist maternity. And Kaushik's father, upon his return, fulfills no maternal role to his son. He erects a totally impersonal Christmas tree that shows no remnants of cultural or other genuineness with his late wife, nor does he project any potential for his future family onto

this object. It sits, generic and meaningless in their living room. Upon hearing that his request that Kaushik take a picture of his family is denied, because Kaushik forgot his camera, his father's disappointment resurfaces in an exemplification of lost maternity, "That look of irritated disappointment, the one that had appeared the day my mother died, and was missing now that he'd married Chitra, passed briefly across my father's face" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 280). In short, the loss of maternity Kaushik feels is still irreplaceable to others (here, Kaushik's father) and Kaushik, a physical reminder of that lost maternity, recalls his father's disappointment best.

Kaushik's father, only ever referred to in the story as Dr. Choudhuri, is falling in love with his new wife, Chitra, and, for her young part, Chitra is successful at mothering her own daughters physically, if not culturally. Her hospitality, like Ashima's, even aids Kaushik and his father's working through their grief and new life scenario:

Chitra cleared all the plates and took them into the kitchen, just as she had the night before, allowing my father and me to relax after dinner in a way that we'd never been able to during the last years of my mother's life" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 280).

Chitra, here, embodies a womanist maternal opportunity for healing, by performing a household duty that shows her own, nontraditional power, which Kaushik easily recognizes. But the loss of his mother's maternity cannot be filled directly by a substitute wife, no matter her hospitality. Chitra is not Kaushik's mother and her maternity, like all maternity Kaushik is exposed to, is very limited.

Kaushik is unnerved by his father's newfound love for Chitra, and his own maternity (Kaushik's) comes into play on behalf of his two step-sisters, "I sensed that

they needed me to guard them, as I needed them, from the growing, incontrovertible fact that Chitra and my father now formed a couple” (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 282).

Kaushik’s maternity is not the only womanist dimension here – he is a man taking on the cultural nurturing of two young girls, which shows a male-female womanistic cooperation. But the age difference (Rupa and Piu are more than ten years younger than Kaushik) and the gender difference between two distinctly unrelated parties – Kaushik and his step-sisters – form a unique bond that inspires new identity growth in Kaushik he has not experienced before: “Though I was only twenty-one, I remember wondering, just then, what it might be like to have a child” (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 283), Kaushik thinks, not unlike Gogol at the conclusion of his own identity narrative.

But, Kaushik’s narrative, not yet at a close, is interrupted by its perpetually recurring theme of maternity lost. When Kaushik discovers his sisters examining a box of his later mother’s pictures one night, he threatens and physically shakes the girls:

‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’ I said now.
Rupa looked at me, her dark eyes flashing, and Piu began to cry.... I grabbed Rupa by the shoulders from where she sat crouched on the floor, shaking her forcefully...
‘You have no right to be looking at these,’ I told them. ‘They don’t belong to you, do you understand?’ (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 286)

Kaushik explodes, destroying any maternity he bestowed (perhaps even harming the young girls opportunities at trusting male maternity in the future) and severing yet another tie that could have built a much-needed cultural maternity Kaushik craves and searches for but never receives.

Kaushik’s eventual connection with maternity, even maternity lost, which is the best connection he can attempt to make, is with Hema, an old family friend whom he runs

into, after years apart, in Rome. “ ‘Our parents,’ Kaushik had said lightly” (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 310), in answering friends’ queries about how he and Hema knew each other, when they coincidentally met abroad at the home of mutual friends. Throughout their affair, Kaushik and Hema both admit that their connection is partly due to Hema’s familiarity with Kaushik’s late mother. When Kaushik and his family moved to the United States early in the narrative, when Hema and Kaushik are only young teens, they stay with Hema’s family and Hema is one of the first to learn that Kaushik’s mother is dying of breast cancer. This revelation comes directly following Hema’s receiving her first bra, fitted for her in a department store fitting room while she stood beside Kaushik’s mother, whose bare, cancerous breasts she unabashedly flaunted before Hema. Yet, Hema is unabashed when she recalls Kaushik’s late mother naked, as she herself (Hema) undresses, just before sex early in her affair with Kaushik, after both characters have reached adulthood. At this passionate moment Hema recalls Kaushik’s mother, complimenting her own (Hema’s) beauty long ago:

Hema remembered that it was Kaushik’s mother who had first paid her that compliment, in the fitting room shopping for bras, and she told this to Kaushik. It was the first mention, between them, of his mother, and yet it did not cause them to grow awkward. If anything it bound them closer together, and Hema knew, without having to be told, that she was the first person he’d ever slept with who’d known his mother, who was able to remember her as he did. (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 313)

Indeed, this quote displays that Hema’s mention of Parul only connects the two young lovers during sex. And similar nostalgia for Parul pervades Hema and Kaushik’s affair. Hema and Kaushik seem mutually drawn both to each other and to their shared memories of Kaushik’s late mother.

But Hema, unfamiliar with many facets of Kaushik's daily life – the extensive travel, the horrific photos, the loss of maternity Kaushik experiences firsthand – cannot make a permanent connection to Kaushik, despite her love for him. She returns to her planned life, turned off by his impulsiveness, marries according to a prearranged engagement, and becomes pregnant, living not unhappily (but still thinking of Kaushik) until she hears of his death.

I returned to my existence, the existence I had chosen instead of you... Those cold, dark days I spent in bed, unable to speak, burning with new life, but mourning your death, went unquestioned by Navin, who had already begun to take a quiet pride in my condition. My mother, who called often from India to check on me, had heard, too. 'Remember the Choudhuris, the family that once stayed with us?' she began. It might have been your child, but this was not the case. We had been careful, and you had left nothing behind. (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 333)

Kaushik's paternity, biologically, and his cultural maternity, even the nostalgia of what little maternity his mother offered, is entirely gone from Hema's earth in Lahiri's sad conclusion. Indeed, maternity is lost in it, and even though she carries a child, Hema's pain, and the disconnection she feels from her husband and her child's father implies a perpetuation of pain and disillusionment that Hema will live only to pass on.

In Zulu Sofala's "Foreword" to Hudson-Weems' *Africana Womanism*, Sofala writes, "To successfully destroy a people, its female component must first be destroyed" (xviii). The death of Kaushik's mother begins Kaushik's journey toward his own destruction. Parul's death foreshadows Kaushik's own death and its impact on Hema, who is devastated by his passing. It also implies Lahiri's foreshadowing of a destruction or loss of Bengali-Americans' maternity and the destruction this loss implies on others. Given the images Kaushik captures in his lens, one can only conclude that Lahiri

foreshadows maternal loss on a global scale as well. However, Lahiri's narrative and Hema's memory presents a lasting testament to maternity, implying that Hema's and Kaushik's tale of maternity lost is not entirely complete. Because Hema's memory remains, it is possible to view Lahiri's narrative with a slight glimmer of hope for cultural maternity and womanism in general.

Kaushik's death creates a maternal rift and provides a commentary that implies a pessimism of Lahiri's that is newly emerging. Maternity lost, Lahiri implies, only spawns further cultural – individual and communal – death. And, through a womanist lens, maternity lost also perpetuates cultural loss.

Cross-Cultural Sisterhood in Lahiri's work

The fictional metaphor of Kaushik, like that of Gogol's, is carried out through the cooperative maternity of women and men, in clear womanistic fashion, but that is not to say that sisterhood does not play an essential role in womanism, nor in Lahiri's fictional manifestations, as well.

In *The Namesake*, Ashima cross-culturally bonds, even as she is partly liberated by, her American co-workers at the library, where an American librarian offers her a job.

She works at the library to pass the time – she has been going regularly for years, taking her children to story hour when they were young and checking out magazines and books of knitting patterns for herself, and one day Mrs. Buxton, the head librarian, asked if she would be interested in a part-time position. (Lahiri, *Namesake* 162; ch. 7)

It is true that this quote manifests Ashima's cultural growth ("They are the first American friends she has made in her life" (Lahiri, *Namesake* 162; ch. 7) the narrator later claims) and represents Ashima's exploration into a culture that is alike and yet different to her

own – “A number of them live alone, as Ashima does now, because they are divorced” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 162; ch. 7) the narrator intercedes, with Ashima’s thoughts. It is in this piece of exploration, in marriage, that Lahiri shows Ashima’s similarity and difference to her American co-workers. They too are isolated, but their reasons differ, and it is because of her culture that Ashima would never be alone despite divorce. Sonia, her daughter, remains with her out of Bengali duty following her father’s death, and when Sonia marries, Ashima makes plans to travel and live with different portions of her family at different times during each year.

But there are several other important observations to be made of this encounter. Again, Ashima’s cultural growth is intertwined with the growth – physical, temporal and cultural – of her children. As Ashima educates her children, taking them to the library, she too gains an education of sorts. And, Ashima’s first opportunity for career independence, a formalization of her independence outside the home, is formed by the cooperative work of two women – the Bengali-American Ashima, in her regular attendance and use of the library as an aide to living in America and by a Caucasian-American woman, Mrs. Buxton, who lends not a helping hand but an indiscriminate, American opportunity for Ashima to make all her own (which she does by infusing her co-workers lives with stories of her Bengali-American experiences and by filling their break room with culinary Bengali treats and delicacies.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, a life is saved by cross-cultural womanist sistering, in the short story “Heaven-Hell,” when an American neighbor prevents a destitute Bengali-American woman from setting herself ablaze after a poorly ended love affair, lending

credibility to the notion that Lahiri values sistering, even cross-cultural bonding among women, to the highest degree. Yet Lahiri does not place it as the main aspect to all of her womanistic narratives. That space she reserves for male-female and family bonding, in pure womanist fashion.

Phillips best defines cross-cultural womanist interaction as not exclusive, essential or assimilatory but as a process of “collaboration” (28) and this best describes Ashima and her library co-workers, as well as “Heaven-Hell’s” mother and neighbor. Phillips’ emphasis on the “reality of intersectionality” of overlapping of ethnic, cultural and gendered oppression, of theories, of cultural interchange is perhaps her most important contribution to womanism and Lahiri supports this well in addition to manifesting womanistic male-female cooperation and maternity.

Conclusions on Lahiri’s Manifestations of Womanism

Although it is easy to observe that from her pre-9/11 *Namesake* narrative to her post-9/11 novella “Hema and Kaushik,” Lahiri makes a decisive turn toward pessimism, it may be more important to note that the potential for pessimism like that Kaushik experiences surrounded Gogol too -- there was a decisive breakdown in culture and in Gogol’s marriage at the moment that his international food, on an anniversary date with Moushumi, began to grow tasteless. Although this is miniscule moment in the *Namesake* narrative, a narrative where Gogol is largely a hopeful figure for maternalizing his own identity further and for upholding a proper womanist maternity in his relationships and with his children, Gogol is a concrete example that an originary culture had already occurred within his identity creation. One must remember that Gogol was forming an

identity between American and Bengali-American cultural elements, not a dichotomy of essential American and Bengali identity forms. This reveals that a pure cultural Bengali identity was irretrievably lost when his parents came to the United States (despite the useful international and cross-cultural growth that occurred as a result). Both the Bengali-American identity form his father embodied as well as that version of Bengali-Americanism Ashima bestowed is gone. Each generation creates its own manifestation of cross-cultural identity and Ashoke's example died with his physical death, just as Ashima's embodiment concluded, in the version exemplified in the novel, with the commencement of her retirement travel. In other words, in the generational growth that focuses downward toward Gogol, he is losing his Bengali roots, if only just a little, while honoring the remaining elements nonetheless. This has larger implications for a womanist theory that is, thus far, largely Afrocentric and concerned with cultural re-creation.

Lahiri's womanist manifestations of maternity, coupled with male-female cooperation are apt manifestations of an Indian-American/Southeast Asian womanism that Phillips only suggests, but Lahiri's presentation of an inevitable loss of culture begs questions of Ogunyemi's and Hudson-Weems' Afrocentric womanist articulations. If Lahiri only well displays most womanist characteristics, and proposes other characteristics that might well suit a Bengali-American womanism, isn't an articulation of Indian-/Bengali-American womanism necessary, and, if that womanism differs from Hudson-Weems's and Ogunyemi's womanisms, what name, as Gogol asked himself, is appropriate for it?

Chapter 2: Toward an Indian-/Bengali-American Womanism

The 'Self-Naming' Problem

In her 1993 book *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, Clenora Hudson-Weems writes:

The Africana woman, in realizing and properly accessing herself and her movement, must properly *name* herself and her movement—Africana womanist and Africana Womanism. This a key step, which many women of African descent have failed to address. While they have taken the initiative to differentiate their struggle from the White woman's struggle to some degree, they have yet to give their struggle its own name. (55-6)

Like Gogol, Lahiri's womanism is in a perpetual search for its own name and definition. There are several reasons for this. First and foremost, Lahiri and her characters are not Africana – they are Bengali-Americans, and while they well display the maternity and male-female cooperation of African/a womanism, they do not *always* follow suit with the theories of Ogunyemi or Hudson-Weems.

In her "Afterthought" to *Africana Womanism*, Third Edition, Hudson-Weems addresses the issue of naming non-Africana womanisms:

Since I have been working on the theory of *Africana Womanism*, many of my non-Africana colleagues have told me that they closely identify with the concept and even embrace much of it as representative of their level of struggle today: the eighteen characteristics of the Africana woman are universal. However, the terminology itself poses a problem for them since they are not of African descent. Indeed, because they cannot claim to be Africanans themselves, the challenge for me then becomes the concern for creating a means of bringing the terminology and concept within the context of a broader worldview.

Deleting the first part of the coinage, *Africana*, and leaving only the second part, *womanism*, is problematic, since Alice Walker has already defined the term Womanism as being very closely akin to feminism.

In coining the term *Africana Womanism*, two things were of utmost importance to me – ethnicity and gender, both of which are grounded in the context of the particular experience of the subject. The same kind of concern for details and particularity regarding ethnicity and gender are just as crucial for all

women in naming and defining their reality. Therefore, after much consideration I have concluded that those who accept and identify with the underlined ideology of *Africana Womanism*, but whose roots are other than African, could hold the term *womanism* and preface it, as has the Africanan, with their particular ethnic orientation. For example, we would have the Native-American Womanist, the European Womanist, the Hispanic Womanist, the Asian Womanist and so on. (145)

Yet, simply re-naming womanism such as Lahiri's Bengali-American characters manifest is still problematic. The differences in history between African, Bengali/Indian, and Bengali-/Indian-American cultures have manifested different cultural identities warranting a new name and definition for Bengali-/Indian-American womanism.

Afrocentricity in Womanism

Recall Hudson-Weems' eighteen characteristics of an Africana womanist:

(1) *a self-namer* and (2) *a self-definer*; (3) *family-centered*, (4) *genuine in sisterhood*, (5) *strong*, (6) *in concert with male in struggle*, (7) *whole*, (8) *authentic*, (9) *a flexible role player*, (10) *respected*, (11) *recognized*, (12) *spiritual*, (13) *male compatible*, (14) *respectful of elders*, (15) *adaptable*, (16) *ambitious*, (17) *mothering* and (18) *nurturing*. (143)

While Ashima centrally embodies the maternal, self-defining adaptability of Hudson-Weems's characteristics, she does not possess any outstanding sense of physical strength similar to that of Africana womanists. Aside from strength of character, Ashima does not possess the kind of physical strength Hudson-Weems attributes to women and men of the African diaspora as a result of their endurance of slavery and racial violence in and from cultures who endorsed slavery.

“From its very nature, *Africana Womanism*...has a definite slant toward Afrocentricity in its truest meaning/sense” (47), Hudson-Weems admits. In addition to historical cultural differences, Lahiri shows a loss of culture in both Gogol's identity

articulation between Bengali-American and American identities (as opposed to the negotiation of purer Bengali and American identities his parents underwent) in *The Namesake* and Kaushik's loss of maternity in "Hema and Kaushik" that is inconsistent with the Afrocentricity or return to African values described by Hudson-Weems in her version of womanism. Take, for example, H-W's following quote, the last paragraph of the conclusion of her 1993 book on womanism:

If all Africana men respected the original reality of the equality of both sexes in African cosmology, then they would refuse to continue to allow external forces, such as non-traditional African religions and alien political family structures wherein female subjugation is inherent, to influence their lives and ways. The end result would be that Africana people (men and women) the world over would then collectively struggle towards recovering their natural birthright as determiners of their fate as a liberated people, dedicated to their families and their future generations. (144)

Here, Lahiri differs from Hudson-Weems's Africana womanism. Despite her manifestations of cultural maternity, Lahiri depicts cultural essentialism as in vain. Culture in its purest form, Lahiri implies in her fiction, cannot be saved, if ever it even existed.

Hudson-Weems's following words on Africana womanism certainly apply to Ashima's cultural adaptation and maternity: "In spite of all, she was a woman and a mother, not mere property, and no matter what, her White owners could neither control nor dictate her knowledge of these factors or her human response to them" (57). The oppression Ashima faces is wholly unlike the oppression experienced by members of the African diaspora, who were often subjected to slavery, its violence, and/or the resulting racism slavery bred or, conversely, the racism enacted to justify slavery.

Likewise, it is true that Indian women are more like African women in the following dichotomy of Awa Thiam's from *Black Sisters, Speak Out*: "Where Black women have to combat colonialism and neo-colonialism, capitalism and the patriarchal system, European women only have to fight against capitalism and patriarchy" (qtd in Ntiri 8). However, Indian women do not necessarily experience what Daphne Williams Ntiri invokes in her introduction to Hudson-Weems, "The status, struggles and experiences of the Africana woman in forced exile in Europe, Latin America, the United States or at home in Africa remain typically unique and separate from that of other women of color" (3). Indian women and their families are not, for the most part, in forced exile. Nor do Lahiri's characters explore womanism in non-Bengali-American contexts and landscapes. Indeed, as Ntiri points out, "So necessary are the reasons to advocate a theory that is properly labeled" (3).

"The Africana womanist also presents herself as a *self-definer*; she alone defines her reality. From a historical perspective, the Africana woman has always managed to eke out a separate, private reality for herself and her family, regardless of that defined by the slave master, for example" (57), Hudson-Weems writes. The African woman Hudson-Weems describes has a history and culture different from the history of culture and of Ashima. Yet, the cultural maternity Ashima bestows on her children is very much alike to the cultural maternity theoretically articulated in womanist works. Lahiri's womanist manifestations of cultural effects, which greatly compliment African/a womanist articulations, contradict a cohesive notion of African and Bengali causality. And so the Afrocentricity of womanism begs many questions. Is womanism too specific in its

theoretical origins, or, if it is adapted in a global sense, will womanism then become too plural? And, of course, can “womanism,” with its Afrocentric roots, be considered a proper name for a theory to describe the historically different but resultingly similar Bengali maternity Lahiri manifests?

Classist Oppression

Womanists from Hudson-Weems to Phillips primarily agree on opposition to classism as a tenet of womanism, but Lahiri’s critique and commentary on classism is only subtlety explored. While Lahiri hints at classist sentiment in comparing pre-packaged, always new American consumerist policy with the used and re-using, thrifty anti-consumerism of Ashima and Bengali-Americans, Lahiri does not critique classism much more explicitly in *Unaccustomed Earth*, where her examples include Ruma’s fear of Akash’s mild American palate and a comparison between the American-like, extravagant consumerism of the Choudhuris against Hema’s family’s thrifty reuse policy in “Hema and Kaushik.” This critique of classism is not nearly as overt and explored as classism is in Bharati Mukherjee’s Indian-American novel *Jasmine*, where poverty controls the destiny (and destituteness) of the protagonist Jasmine. The example of classism only lends credibility to the notion that a complete articulation of Indian/Bengali-American womanism will necessitate a large scale theoretical and critical exploration too large for this thesis project, but intriguing and necessary to womanism nonetheless.

As Hudson-Weems says of Africana Womanism, it too must be articulated according to its own needs. For the challenge of naming, I have yet no suggestion, as I

have only explored Lahiri's texts, but it is undeniable that womanism (especially that of Ogunyemi, Hudson-Weems, and Phillips) is its namesake, and that the womanist manifestations of Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction suggest a rearticulation for a Bengali-/Indian-American womanism that requires more primary textual exploration.

The Articulation of Womanist Men

Despite the fact that womanism is a refutation of feminism, there is some debate within womanism as to the role of men. Ogunyemi and Hudson-Weems agree that men are as much needed as women in womanism:

It is fairly difficult to finalize the dynamics of the true Africana woman without giving some attention to her male counterpart, the positive Africana man... The following are eighteen identifiable characteristics of the Africana man to which men in general could aspire: (1) *self-namer* and (2) *self-definer*, (3) *family-centered*, (4) *role model*, (5) *strong*, (6) *committed to struggle*, (7) *whole*, (8) *authentic*, (9) *flexible role player*, (10) *respectful of women*, (11) *protector*, (12) *moral*, (13) *female compatible*, (14) *respectful of elders*, (15) *supportive*, (16) *ambitious*, (17) *fathering*, and (18) *loving*. With such qualities, it is inconceivable that such a man would endorse any form (verbal and/or physical) of female brutalization and dehumanization. (Hudson-Weems 144)

It is true that Gogol is undoubtedly a self-namer and self-definer who is family-centered, seeks to be a role model, and is committed to struggle, to retain his Bengali identity elements and to create positive intercultural exchanges. He has in view a whole identity in which he is a flexible role player (as seen in his interactions with both Maxine and Moushumi) that is respectful of women, moral, female compatible, and respectful of elders (to even the point that he can interpret and respect interpretations of his mother's actions and reactions). He is supportive, ambitious, fathering (of his own and his parents and future children's identities) and, of course, loving. But, his elements as a strong protector do not stand out. Additionally, some of the womanistic characteristics he

displays are very subtle. Likewise, Kaushik attempts to self-define and create a family-centered life (if only by connecting to those nostalgic for his mother). He respects women, is moral, and loving. But, Kaushik is not fathering, in fact resisting this possibility by insisting on birth control use during sex with Hema. And, he is not particularly ambitious (which leads to Hema's distancing herself from him). Lastly, it cannot be denied that he certainly does not commit himself to the struggles he regularly photographs for money.

Indeed Lahiri's presentation of male characters leads to the question, without projecting an answer, how Indian-/Bengali-American womanists might envision their relationships with men. Would a Bengali-American womanist envision fictional articulations, like those of Lahiri's, as theoretically the same cooperative manifestations of African/a womanism or would they differ slightly in their articulation of male-female cooperative elements? Even a slight difference in the articulation (fictional or theoretical) of Bengali-American male-female cooperation would require exploration and, possibly, new theoretical terms. Perhaps, a Bengali-American womanist manifestation of male-female cooperation would be the spark leading to recognition of the need for an independent name for what can now only be called Bengali-American womanism.

The Cross-Cultural Aspect

Additionally, Ashima presents a facet of womanism that Hudson-Weems does not consider beyond contemplating the sharing of a name – that of cross-cultural womanist bonding. It is true that white women both help and harm Ashima and Gogol in *The Namesake*. Lydia, as seen above, assimilates Gogol to a point that she loses sight of his

ethnic and cultural identity (this is complicated by the fact that Gogol seeks a relationship with Maxine to exile the Bengali component of his identity, however). But it is Mrs. Buxton at the library who helps Ashima gain career independence and share her Bengali-ness with American co-workers, causing a real intercultural bonding that characterizes the global/international cooperation of womanism. It is undeniable that Lahiri's "Heaven-Hell" upholds cross-cultural womanist bonding, when a white neighbor saves a Bengali-American mother, who later helps save her own daughter after a soured relationship with her narrative of cross-cultural womanist bonding. Theoretically, however, examples of cross-cultural womanism need further explication as well.

The Intergenerational Aspect

Lahiri poses one potential characteristic that might well suit an Indian/Bengali womanism, however. In the *Namesake* narrative, Ashima, Ashoke, and Gogol collectively form a potential new tenet to womanism -- intergenerational learning. Not only does Gogol learn from his parents, but they learn from him. This is most notable in Ashima's pride, after Gogol's failed marriage to the Bengali-American Moushumi that her daughter Sonia is marrying for love, to a Chinese American, rather than for mutual cultural similarity or because of cultural tradition:

Something tells her Sonia will be happy with this boy—quickly she corrects herself—this young man. He has brought happiness to her daughter, in a way Moushumi had never brought it to her son. That it was she who had encouraged Gogol to meet Moushumi will be something for which Ashima will always feel guilty. How could she have known? But fortunately they have not considered it their duty to stay married, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima's generation do. They are not willing to accept, to adjust, to settle for something less than their ideal of happiness. That pressure has given way, in the case of the subsequent generation, to American common sense. (Lahiri, *Namesake* 276; ch. 12)

Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter, who posits that womanism should emphasize “revision and retention,” said in her exploration of Sindiwe Magona’s narrative *To My Children’s Children* that narrative “enables Magona to communicate to future generations” (69). The narratives of both Gogol and Kaushik imply that cultural retention is important, but that, equally important is the revision of cultural elements so that they are useful and realistic. For example, Gogol sees no use for Bengali religious ceremony throughout the namesake, but, when faced with the death of his father, Gogol finds solace in the Bengali religious tradition of mourning. With its usefulness revealed, Gogol finds another piece of his Bengali identity that he can revise, by using it to mourn his father, and retain to pass on to his children when they are faced with his own death. Later in her essay, Aegerter builds on the opportunity for generations to learn from one another: “The younger and experienced narrators perform, then, in a dialogic manner, suggesting the inadequacy of a single perspective or singular voice (and demonstrating the contradictions of identity)” (70). Aegerter calls these narrators “communal protagonists” incorporating and revising, with specificity to her own culture, Western theory. Certainly the inter-generational aspects described here by Aegerter well apply to the connection between Gogol and Ashima, and possible connections between Gogol and his own children (and their connection to Ashima) one day.

Ogunyemi, earlier, hints at the possibility of intergenerational exchange in her explorations of Nigerian novels by women when speaking of cross gendered cooperation: “If we play our politics shrewdly, as men and women, we can live to honor our mothers and encourage fathers, who conveniently absent themselves for a while when there is

trouble, to accept responsibility. This is homecoming time; we must put the house we inherited in order” (332).

In Gogol’s journey, womanist maternity is not only exemplified but further articulated by a generational gaze that Lahiri institutes. Indeed, not only have Ashima and Ashoke passed on the maternity they received from their parents, but they too have learned from Gogol and Sonia, in an exchange that suggests a womanistic maternal instinct that moves from older generation to younger and from younger to older that has been hinted at but not fully articulated in womanist theory thusfar...If only the same womanist intergenerational learning could have happened for Kaushik.

The Local-Global, Autonomous-Communal Aspect

In their “Introduction” to *The Post-Colonial Condition of African Literature*, Daniel Gover (et al) states, “One reads in African literature both of the social changes on the continent as well as the need for even greater social change” (2). Likewise, Ogunyemi cites the local work of Africana womanism as a project completed for better global harmony. But does globalizing a theory run the risk of pluralizing it too much?

In the *Post-Colonial Condition*, Gover’s colleague Adeleke rightly asks:

Is the concept of womanism not by implication a universalist theory?... Suffice it to say for now that black feminism is as pro-black as white feminism is pro-white. In other words, both are race-conscious, just as sexism is men-conscious and feminism is woman-conscious. It is for this reason that womanism which has a broader horizon seems to be the best of the three ideologies. It focuses on women and men of all colours and from all parts of the world. Its constant transformations may, however, be a reflection of the same type of problem which proponents of feminism have usually been accused of, that is, womanism may eventually become pluralized as a result of local colourings, just as feminism is often construed as a multiple phenomenon. (34)

Adeleke implies that globalization and localization of theory run the risk of great complication. Womanism, in Hudson-Weems's and Ogunyemi's terms, seeks to succeed by doing just that – being plural. But the words of Layli Phillips, a manifestation of pluralism, raise alarm: “Contradiction is no problem” Phillips writes, in what seems to be taken to the degree that difference no longer breeds dialogue. “To reiterate, ‘*womanist*’ is a term of avowal; once you claim it, it’s yours, and you decide what it means and how to enact it” (xli), Phillips writes. As previously stated, this raises many important questions for womanism, such as: How can any theory be nonideological or nonbiased? How can one theory fight all oppression without sacrificing its ideas to too much plurality?

Controversial, also, is Phillips' perspective on feminism and womanism. While she agrees with Hudson-Weems that feminism “exhibit[s] both racism and cultural imperialism rather unselfconsciously” (xxxiii), her alignment with Hudson-Weems and Ogunyemi's womanist ideas of maternity, male-female cooperation and other central womanist tenets, ends with her resistance to disconnect womanism from feminism. Phillips is not alone in this move; Adeleke and others support a bonding or cooperation between feminism and womanism, yet breaking from feminism was the very starting point for Hudson-Weems's and Ogunyemi's theoretical work. In a move that attempts to manifest her overlapping, harmonious womanist view, Phillips writes: “To say that one is a womanist is not to say that one is a feminist, even if the two are not mutually exclusive; a person can be either, neither or both” (xxxiii). It is true – a person can be either, neither, or both, but traditionally, “womanist” scholars who associate themselves and their work with feminism lack the elements of Africana feminism (maternity, male-

female cooperation emphasis, and Afrocentricity) that Phillips supports, and that have endured theoretical challenge over the years.

Phillips concludes, “Feminism is a superior social-justice perspective for women. The womanist perspective holds that, as long as the job of social justice gets done, it scarcely matters what label it falls under; the more perspectives contributing, the better” (xxxiii). How can these conceptions share space in the same theoretical paradigm with womanist theoretical founder Hudson-Weems, who writes:

As previously stated, the notion of Africana women moving ‘from margin to center’ of the feminist movement, as proposed by Bell Hooks is ludicrous... For how can any woman hope to move from the peripheral to the center of a movement that, historically, has not included her on the agenda. (40)

In short, Phillips’s realignment of womanism with black feminism, despite her inclusive manner of incorporating African/a womanism’s tenets to the heart of her cohesive theory of womanism, is flawed and undoes womanism by neglecting Hudson-Weems’ original mission of creating a womanist theory entirely independent of feminism and Western racism in gender theory.

Locating Womanism

Yet there is a more complicating element to the Western rejection of feminism in womanism. Like Lahiri, who is a Bengali-American living, working and publishing in the United States, Clenora Hudson-Weems is an *African-American* teaching, writing, and publishing in the United States, as is Layli Phillips. It cannot be denied that Ogunyemi is Nigerian (Adebayo 1) and has Nigerian elements as a central part of her identity, but nor should it be denied that she teaches and publishes in America as well. (Another example includes Mary E. Modupe Kolawole, author of *Womanism and African Consciousness*

who also lives, teaches, and publishes in the United States but was born and raised in Nigeria.) But, does a theorist's or author's geographical location complicate their position of theorizing for African peoples and of African literature?

Aduke Adebayo and Joseph Adeleke, who publish in *Feminism and Black Women's Creative Writing: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, the only geographically African published text on womanism, support a "feminist" version of African womanism, allying the term "African feminism" or "black feminism" with womanism too easily. These authors miss the subtleties of Ogunyemi's & Hudson-Weems's discussion of womanism, which leads to the question: are these American or Americanized African scholars (Hudson-Weems and Phillips, for example) telling Africans, who are largely without published voice in this matter, how to react critically. Are Hudson-Weems and other womanists inscribing their theories on the voices of Africans, and/or implying a dialogue of womanism that is not vernacular of the African people? In short, are central womanism theorists didactically reinscribing a Eurocentrism from which their theory seeks to break?

In her "Introduction" Adebayo writes, "Feminism is superbly able to describe all issues pertaining to women" (3). She neglects the ideas of self-naming and self-defining that Hudson-Weems suggests, and, given that she publishes in 1996, it is strange, arguably neglectful, that she and her essayists write back only to Ogunyemi and not Hudson-Weems, whose articulations were published in 1993 in *Africana Womanism*.

Ironically, Adebayo herself represents an example of what she points to as a flaw in African feminism and womanism: "More often than not, feminism is adopted or

rejected in our part of the world without an adequate appreciation of what the term implies for different writers and cultures” (6). In saying this, Adebayo presents her own neglect of exploring the anti-feminist articulations of womanism existing prior to her publication.

Additionally, Adeleke, unlike Hudson-Weems and Ogunyemi, cites Alice Walker’s work as the starting point for womanism: “Walker, like others before her, thus combines the issue of racism on the one hand with that of sexism on the other” (29), but as Hudson-Weems points out, allying herself with black feminism negates Walker’s potential to self-define and create a space of non-Western cultural retention and revision. (Adeleke is certainly not alone in this mistake, however. Several critics who write back to womanist theories as proposed by Hudson-Weems and Ogunyemi also cite Walker’s work, neglecting and/or refuting Hudson-Weems’ break with Walker and feminism. Examples include, among many, Tuzyline Jita Allan’s *Womanist and Feminist Aesthetics* and Meera Viswanathan’s Indian Journal of American Studies article “Is Black Woman to White as Female Is to Male? Restoring Alice Walker’s Womanist Prose to the Heart of Feminist Literary Criticism.”)

Adeleke labels Ogunyemi “Nigerian” (1), and perhaps that is why he responds only to her and not Hudson-Weems. Regardless, he neglects the central womanist tenet that womanism break entirely from feminism quantifying the relationship between feminism and womanism thus: “black feminism and its offspring womanism” (33).

Lahiri is a Bengali-American writing and publishing in America about womanisms that, although they will describe Indian-/Bengali-American womanism(s),

are borne out of or can be well explored by African/a womanism. African/a womanism is a theory that, at least in part, seeks to define itself as independent of the West and the West's (as seen by Hudson-Weems and Ogunyemi) inherently racist, classist, and sexist hegemonies. Yet, both the womanist theoretical articulations of Hudson-Weems and Ogunyemi and Lahiri's fiction are published in the West, specifically in the United States.

The controversy over the geographical origins of the womanist theory are an important dialogue in womanism that Lahiri also brings to the front, if only by her own publication location and subject matter. Lahiri presents a manifestation of Bengali-American womanism that is not purely American, not purely Bengali, which could prove insightful to the womanist discussion over the local and global connections and transferability of womanism. If Indian womanism is different from Africana womanism, which is hard to deny, will Hindi womanism differ from Bengali womanism? Lahiri is careful to point out that her characters are Bengali and not Hindi, or belonging to other Indian cultural groups, whom differ significantly in cultural tradition, language and other mores from Bengalis. If Indian cultural manifestations of womanism differ, and this is likely, will local manifestations spiral into criticisms and articulations that run contradictory to the international and global aims of womanism?

Only further theoretical explication, en masse, of womanist theory can conclude the local-global debate in womanism and pass judgment on the importance of womanist theorist geography. But what can be concluded is that, through her fiction, Lahiri not only brings forth new articulations of womanist maternity, but highlights by her work and

by her literary, publishing presence, a need for further articulation of larger womanist tenets. Lahiri's re-locating her Bengali characters to American soil may indicate, even metaphorically, certainly subtly, a challenge to the geography of womanism – if Lahiri writes, as she admits, about Bengali-Americans, how should African-Americans articulate their writing about African/a womanism if they work and publish in the US? Can they then call their womanist theory African/a? What, also, should be made of African scholars', like Adeleke's, neglect of addressing Hudson-Weems and other central non-Nigerian, womanists? In working from a distinctly Bengali-American point of view, just as Hudson-Weems and Ogunyemi worked against feminism from an African and African-American theoretical point of view, Lahiri well manifests and proposes new manifestations of womanism.

In the end, we must all realize that none of these groundbreaking theoretical contributions, despite their geography, should be neglected. All succeed in pointing out, if not entirely rectifying, the racist, classist and gendered tendencies of Western theory and the importance of culturally nurturing theory that is not ethnically or sexually prejudiced.

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri well manifests the womanist conceptions of male-female cooperation and maternity of Clenora Hudson-Weems, Chikweyne Okonjo Ogunyemi and Layli Phillips in her fictional works *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. And, although she inexplicitly refutes and suggests other womanist tenets, working toward an Indian-/Bengali-American womanism, the full articulation of such a theory will necessitate further textual exploration.

That being said, Lahiri's fictional examples well support the need for a womanism independent of current womanism(s)'s Afrocentricity. However, a cautionary word against the pluralistic theory of Phillips, who well introduces but poorly articulates, global womanist theory, is needed and Lahiri, in her local-global, male-female, maternal, cross-cultural and intergenerational womanistic fiction, well articulates examples for a new Bengali-/Indian-American exploration of womanism.

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